Banned Books Reading List: Stand for the Right to Read Freely

By NYPL Staff
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Updated 9/06/2024

Public libraries have always been at the forefront of the fight against censorship, leading to the creation in 1982 of Banned Books Week, a time to highlight titles that were targeted for removal from schools and libraries. However, book banning is not new—it's one of the oldest recorded forms of censorship. Despite the legacy of censorship threatening books and authors, there continues to be a particularly aggressive wave of bans and challenges across America. The American Library Association, which pioneered Banned Books Week, has reported a record amount of books banned in recent years—many of which center people of color and LGBTQ+ voices.

NYPL has created a book list for all ages, selected by our expert librarians, to highlight titles both past and present that are targets of bans and challenges. While this list is just a small sample of the different books that are challenged, it demonstrates the wide range of books that are deemed "too dangerous" to read—and also how these bans and challenges are often aimed at silencing the voices, perspectives, and stories of marginalized communities.

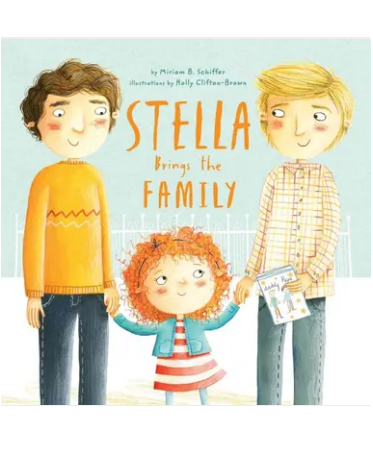
PROTECT THE FREEDOM TO READ

If you're curious about the stories that have been the subject of book bans, explore the books below, talk to your librarians about what other titles have been the target of censorship, then —check them out.

Plus, learn about Banned Books Week at the Library and NYPL's **Freedom to Read** initiative to find more ways you can stand with the Library against book banning.

Jump to: Picture Books | Middle Grade | Young Adult | Adult

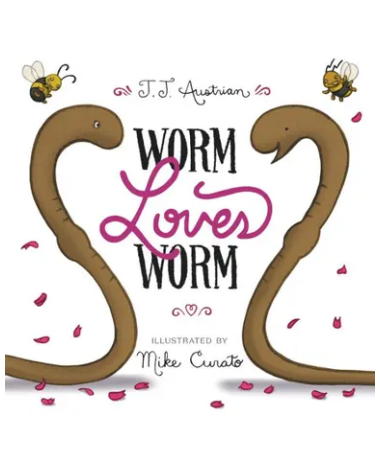
Picture Books



Stella Brings the Family (2015)

by Miriam B. Schiffer

Stella brings her two fathers to school to celebrate Mother's Day.



Worm Loves Worm (2016)

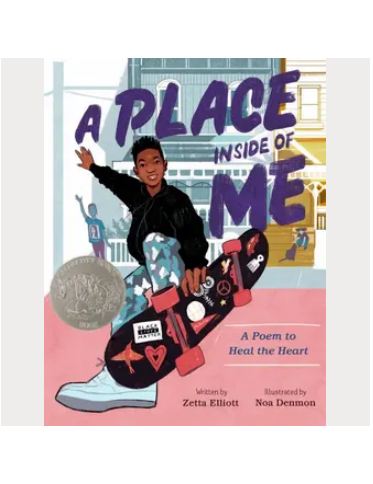
by J.J. Austrian; illustrated by Mike Curato

The insect community is preparing to attend the wedding of two apparently identical worms and wondering which will wear the tux and which the gown before deciding it does not matter.

Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice (2018)

by Marianne Celano, PhD, ABPP, Marietta Collins, PhD, and Ann Hazzard, PhD, ABPP; illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin

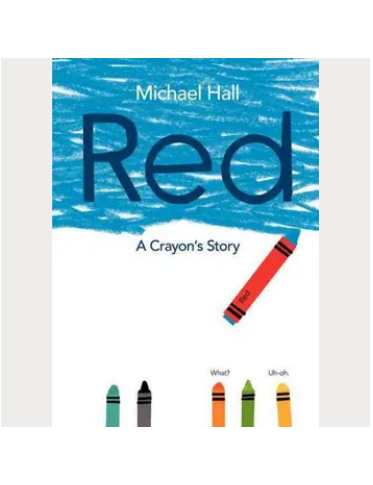
After discussing the police shooting of a local Black man with their families, Emma and Josh know how to treat a new student who looks and speaks differently than his classmates.



A Place Inside of Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart (2020)

by Zetta Elliott; illustrated by Noa Denmon

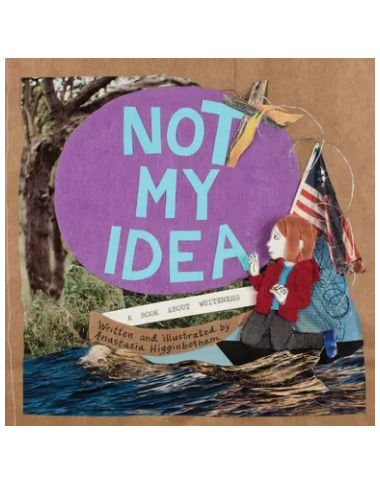
A story in verse that follows a poignant year in the life of a brown child whose community rallies for justice and peace in the aftermath of a police shooting.



Red: A Crayon's Story (2015)

by Michael Hall

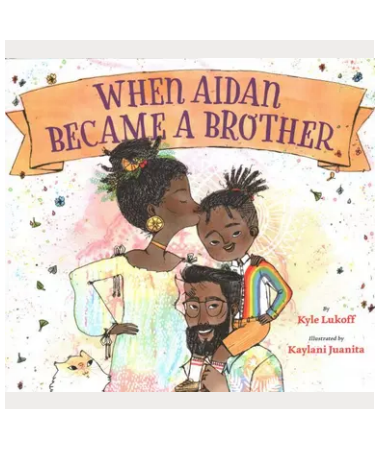
Red's factory-applied label clearly says that he is red, but despite the best efforts of his teacher, fellow crayons and art supplies, and family members, he cannot seem to do anything right until a new friend offers a fresh perspective.



Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness (2018)

by Anastasia Higginbotham

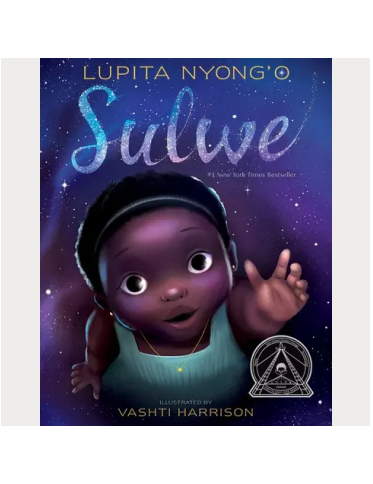
A picture book about racism and racial justice, inviting white children and parents to become curious about racism, accept that it's real, and cultivate justice.



When Aidan Became a Brother (2019)

by Kyle Lukoff; illustrated by Kaylani Juanita

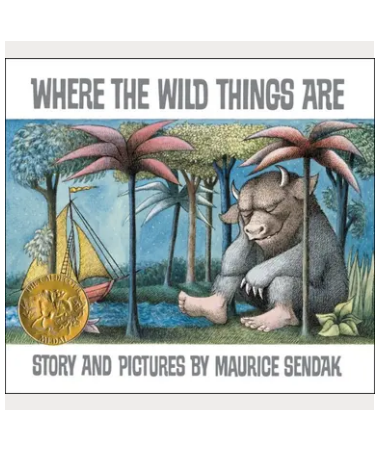
Aidan, a transgender boy, experiences complicated emotions as he and his parents prepare for the arrival of a new baby.



Sulwe (2019)

by Lupita Nyong'o; illustrated by Vashti Harrison

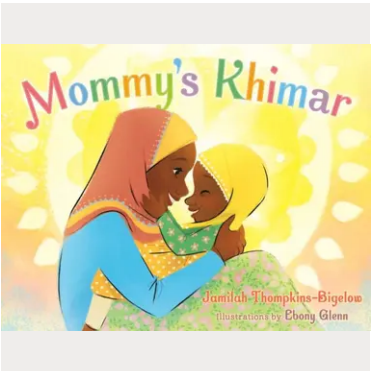
When five-year-old Sulwe's classmates make fun of her dark skin, she tries lightening herself to no avail, but her encounter with a shooting star helps her understand there is beauty in every shade.



Where the Wild Things Are (1963)

by Maurice Sendak

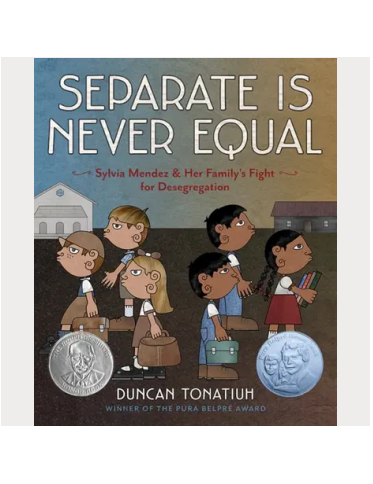
After Max is sent to bed for misbehaving, he sails to the land of the wild things where he becomes their king.



Mommy's Khimar (2018)

by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow; illustrated by Ebony Glenn

A young Muslim girl puts on a head scarf and not only feels closer to her mother, she also imagines herself as a queen, the sun, a superhero, and more.

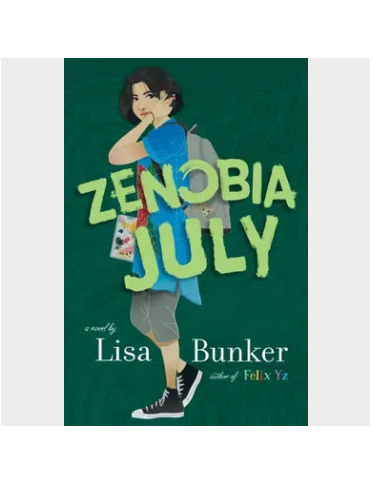


Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation (2014)

by Duncan Tonatiuh

Years before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling Brown v. Board of Education, Sylvia Mendez, an eight-year-old girl of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage, played an instrumental role in Mendez v. Westminster, the landmark desegregation case of 1946 in California.

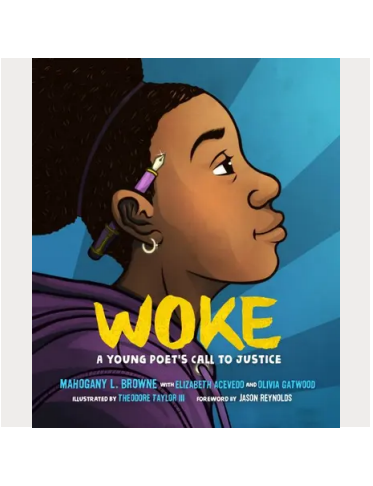
Middle Grade



Zenobia July (2019)

by Lisa Bunker

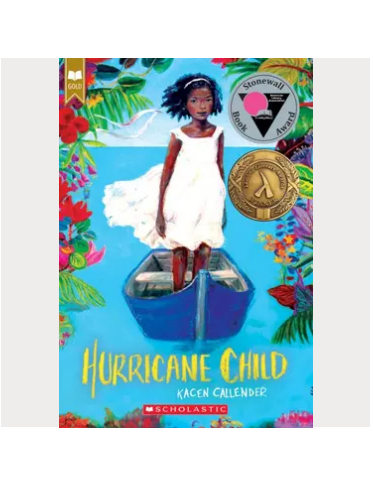
Zenobia July, an excellent coder and hacker, investigates a mystery while wrestling with the challenges of a new school, a new family, and presenting her true gender for the first time.



Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice (2020)

by Mahogany L. Browne; illustrated by Theodore Taylor III

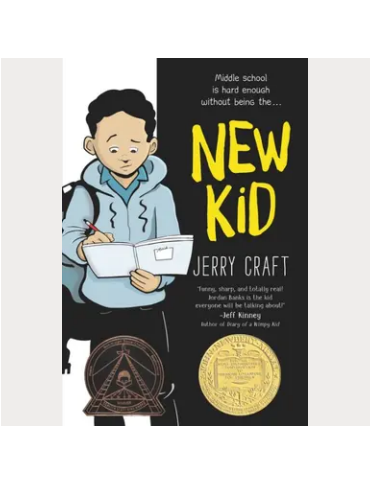
A collection of poems by women of color, written for today's generation of young activists, reflects the passion of the fight for social justice while tackling subjects ranging from discrimination and empathy to acceptance and speaking out.



Hurricane Child (2018)

by Kacen Callender

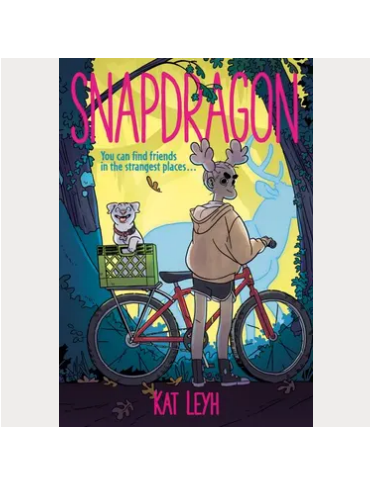
Born on Water Island in the Virgin Islands during a hurricane, which is considered bad luck, twelve-year-old Caroline falls in love with another girl—and together they set out in a hurricane to find Caroline's missing mother.



New Kid (2019)

by Jerry Craft

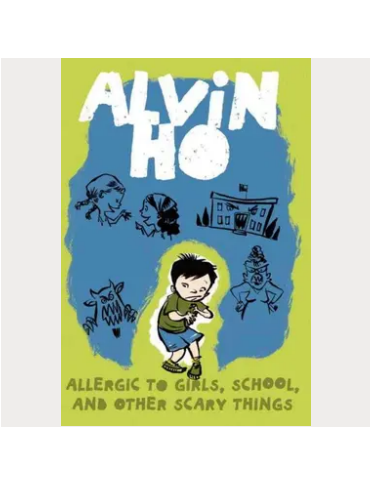
Enrolled in a prestigious private school where he is one of only a few students of color, talented seventh-grade artist Jordan finds himself torn between the worlds of his Washington Heights apartment home and the upscale circles of Riverdale Academy.



Snapdragon (2020)

by Kat Leyh

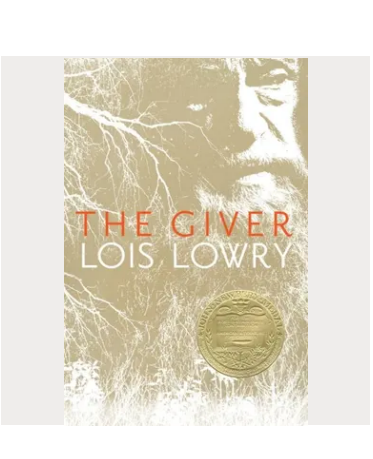
When Snap rescues a family of baby opossums, she asks the town witch, Jacks, for help caring for them, but as Snap starts to get to know Jacks, she realizes that Jacks may have a connection with Snap's family past.



Alvin Ho: Allergic to Girls, School, and Other Scary Things (2008)

by Lenore Look

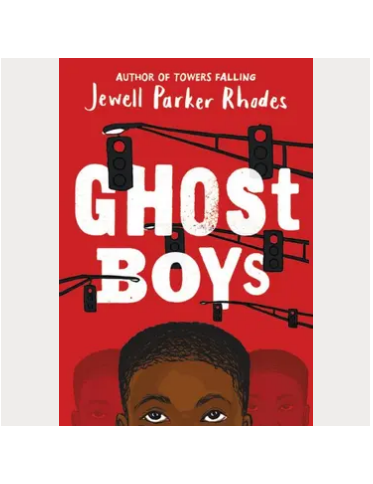
A young boy in Concord, Massachusetts, who loves superheroes and comes from a long line of brave Chinese farmer-warriors, wants to make friends, but first he must overcome his fear of everything.



The Giver (1993)

by Lois Lowry

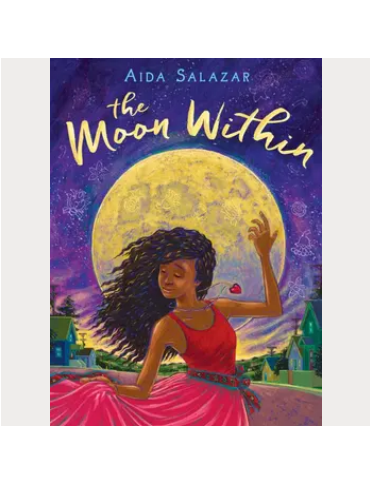
Twelve-year-old Jonas lives in a seemingly ideal world—not until he is given his life assignment as the Receiver does he begin to understand the dark secrets behind his fragile community.



Ghost Boys (2018)

by Jewell Parker Rhodes

After seventh-grader Jerome is shot by a police officer who mistakes his toy gun for a real threat, he observes the aftermath of his death and meets the ghosts of other fallen Black boys including historical figure Emmett Till.



The Moon Within (2019)

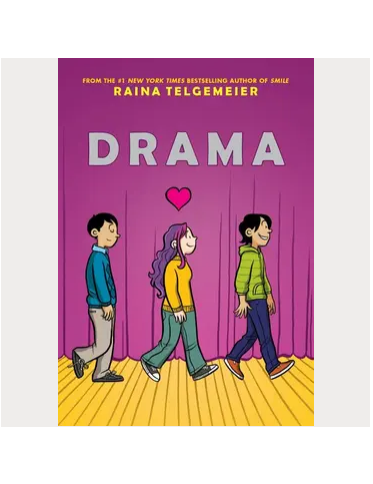
by Aida Salazar

A modern tale of early adolescence finds Celi navigating questions about her changing body, first attraction, and a best friend's genderfluid explorations while resisting her mother's embarrassing plans for an ancestral Mexica moon ceremony to celebrate her first period.

The Deep and Dark Blue (2020)

by Niki Smith

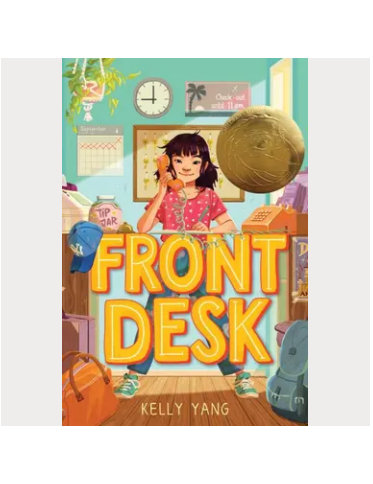
When a political coup usurps their noble house, Hawke and Grayson flee for their lives and assume new identities to join an order of magical women before their quest for vengeance is compromised by Grayson's longing to remain behind and finally live as a girl.



Drama (2012)

by Raina Telgemeier

Designing sets for her middle school's play, Callie tries to overcome limited carpentry skills, low ticket sales, and squabbling crew members only to find her efforts further complicated by the arrival of two cute brothers.

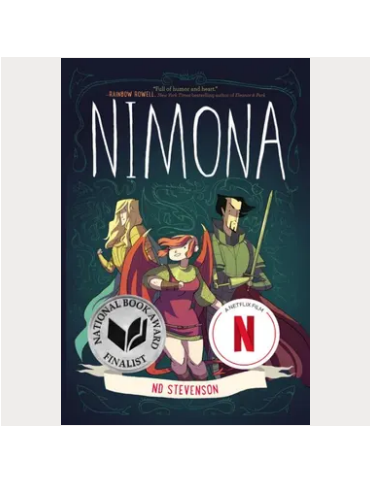


Front Desk (2018)

by Kelly Yang

After emigrating from China, ten-year-old Mia Tang's parents take a job managing a rundown motel, despite the nasty owner, Mr. Yao, who exploits them, while she works the front desk and tries to cope with fitting in at her school.

Young Adult



Nimona (2015)

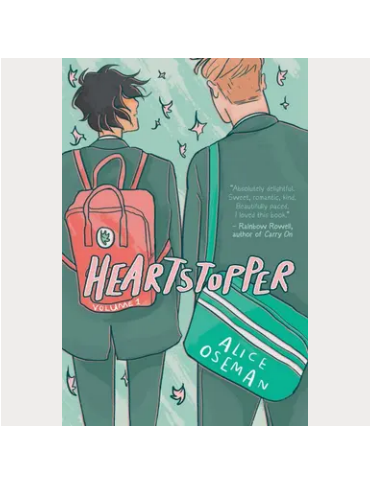
by ND Stevenson

Nimona, a young shapeshifter with a knack for villainy, and Lord Ballister Blackheart, a villain with a vendetta, set out to prove that Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin and his friends are not the heroes everyone thinks they are, but Lord Blackheart soon realizes that Nimona's powers are as murky and mysterious as her past, and her unpredictable wild side might be more dangerous than he is willing to admit.

To All the Boys I've Loved Before (2014)

by Jenny Han

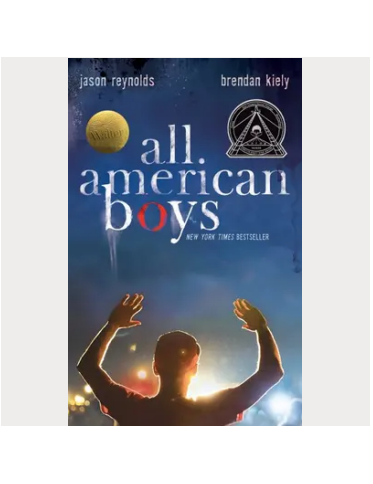
16-year-old Lara Jean Song keeps her love letters in a hatbox her mother gave her. They aren't love letters that anyone else wrote for her; these are ones she's written. One for every boy she's ever loved—five in all. When she writes, she pours out her heart and soul and says all the things she would never say in real life, because her letters are for her eyes only. Until the day her secret letters are mailed, and suddenly, Lara Jean's love life goes from imaginary to out of control.



Heartstopper (2019)

by Alice Oseman

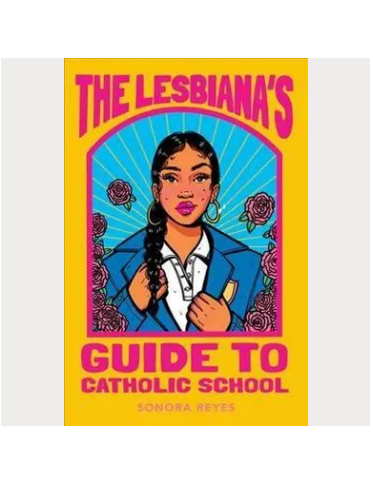
Shy and softhearted Charlie strikes up a friendship with rugby player Nick, and as the two grow closer and take on the ups and downs of high school, their friendship grows into something more.



All-American Boys (2015)

by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

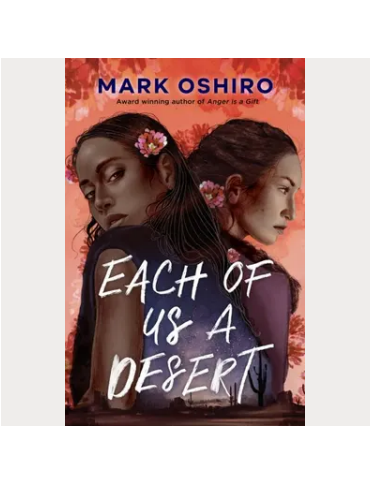
Sixteen-year-old Rashad is mistakenly accused of stealing. Classmate Quinn witnesses his brutal beating at the hands of a police officer who's the older brother of his best friend.



The Lesbiana's Guide to Catholic School (2022)

by Sonora Reyes

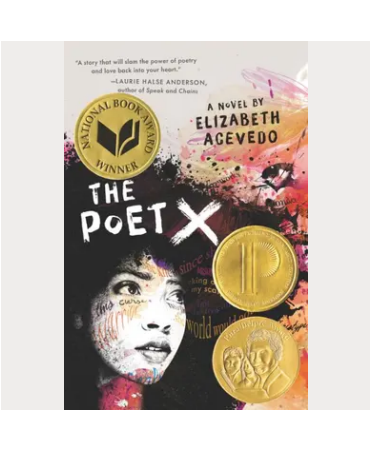
Sixteen-year-old Mexican American Yami Flores starts Catholic school, determined to keep her brother out of trouble and keep herself closeted, but her priorities shift when Yami discovers that her openly gay classmate Bo is also annoyingly cute.



Each of Us a Desert (2020)

by Mark Oshrio

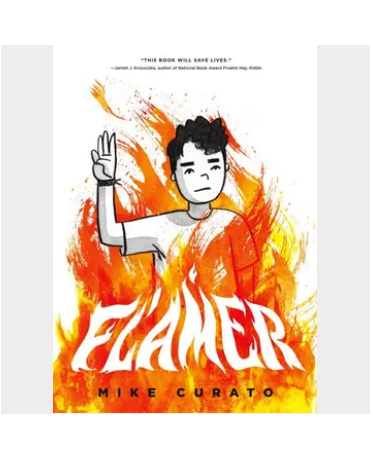
Destined to a solitary life in the desert, a storyteller longing for a kindred spirit encounters the cold and beautiful daughter of her village's murderous conqueror before nightmarish threats challenge their unlikely relationship.



The Poet X (2018)

by Elizabeth Acevedo

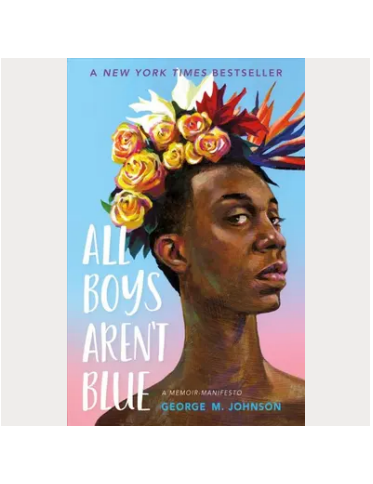
When Xiomara Batista, who pours all her frustrations and passion into poetry, is invited to join the school slam poetry club, she struggles with her mother's expectations and her need to be heard.



Flamer (2020)

by Mike Curato

In the summer between middle school and high school, Aiden Navarro navigates friendships, deals with bullies, and finds himself drawn to Elias, a boy he can't stop thinking about.



All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto (2020)

by George M. Johnson

A prominent journalist and LGBTQIA+ activist shares personal essays that chronicle his childhood, adolescence, and college years as a Black queer youth, exploring subjects ranging from gender identity and toxic masculinity to structural marginalization and Black joy.

Gender Queer: A Memoir (2019)

by Maia Kobabe

Started as a way to explain to eir family what it means to be nonbinary and asexual, *Gender Queer* is a useful guide on gender identity—what it means and how to think about it—for advocates, friends, and humans everywhere.

This One Summer (2014)

by Mariko Tamaki; art by Jillian Tamaki

Rose's latest summer at a beach house is overshadowed by her parents' constant arguments, her younger friend's secret sorrows, and the dangerous activities of older teens.

They Called Us Enemy (2019)

by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott; art by Harmony Becker

A graphic memoir detailing the author's experiences as a child prisoner in the Japanese-American internment camps of World War II, reflecting on the choices his family made in the face of institutionalized racism.

The Hate U Give (2017)

by Angie Thomas

After witnessing her friend's death at the hands of a police officer, Starr Carter's life is complicated when the police and a local drug lord try to intimidate her in an effort to learn what happened the night Kahlil died.

Adult

The Sun and Her Flowers (2017)

by Rupi Kaur

A transcendent journey about growth and healing, ancestry and honoring one's roots and expatriation, and rising up to find a home within yourself.

The Martian (2011)

by Andy Weir

Stranded on Mars by a dust storm that compromised his space suit and forced his crew to leave him behind, astronaut Mark Watney struggles to survive in spite of minimal supplies and harsh environmental challenges that test his ingenuity in unique ways.

Vanity Fair (1848)

by William Makepeace Thackeray

Set during the time of the Napoleonic Wars, this classic gives a satirical picture of a worldly society. The novel revolves around the exploits of the impoverished but beautiful and devious Becky Sharp.

The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

by Margaret Atwood

A look at the near future presents the story of Offred, a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, once the United States, an oppressive world where women are no longer allowed to read and are valued only as long as they are viable for reproduction.

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (2006)

by Alison Bechdel

A graphic novel memoir offering a darkly funny family portrait that details the author's relationship with her father—a funeral home director, high school English teacher, and closeted homosexual.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America (2001)

by Barbara Ehrenreich

In an attempt to understand the lives of Americans earning near-minimum wages, the author works as a waitress in Florida, a cleaning woman in Maine, and a sales clerk in Minnesota.

The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story (2021)

edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jake Silverstein

Eighteen essays explore the legacy of slavery in present-day America and 36 poems and works of fiction illuminate key moments of oppression, struggle, and resistance.

The Kite Runner (2003)

by Khaled Hosseini

Traces the unlikely friendship of a wealthy Afghan youth and a servant's son, in a tale that spans the final days of Afghanistan's monarchy through the atrocities of the present day.

Heavy: An American Memoir (2018)

by Kiese Laymon

An essayist and novelist explores what the weight of a lifetime of secrets, lies, and deception does to a Black body, a Black family, and a nation teetering on the brink of moral collapse.

Beloved (1987)

by Toni Morrison

Sethe, an escaped slave living in post-Civil War Ohio with her daughter and mother-in-law, is persistently haunted by the ghost of her dead baby girl.

The Bluest Eye (1970)

by Toni Morrison

The story of Pecola Breedlove profiles an 11-year-old African American girl growing up in an America that values blue-eyed blondes and the tragedy that results from her longing to be accepted.

Slaughterhouse-Five or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death (1969)

by Kurt Vonnegut

Billy Pilgrim returns home from the Second World War only to be kidnapped by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore who teach him that time is an eternal present.

The Color Purple (1982)

by Alice Walker

The lives of two sisters—Nettie, a missionary in Africa, and Celie, a Southern woman married to a man she hates—are revealed in a series of letters exchanged over thirty years.

The House on Mango Street (1983)

by Sandra Cisneros

A novel of a young girl, Esperanza Cordero, growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. Her neighborhood is one of harsh realities and harsh beauty. Esperanza doesn't want to belong—not to her run-down neighborhood, and not to the low expectations the world has for her.

Summaries provided via NYPL's catalog, which draws from multiple sources. Click through to each book's title for more.

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